

# The Ancient Olympics

By Mary L. Bushong

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Do you like watching events like the Olympics? You have probably seen it on T.V. Perhaps you have even been able to see some of it in person!

The Olympics we see now are called the modern Olympics. No one knows the exact date of the first ancient Olympic Games. Some people think they might have started as early as the thirteenth century B.C., but the first recorded games were in 776 B.C.

There are many legends about why the games were started. Some think they were started by the god Zeus. Others think that the Greek hero Pelops won an important chariot race. Still others say that they are in honor of a foot race won by Hercules, and re-enacted every four years. However it began, it continued every four years after that.

Ancient Greeks measured time in four year intervals called Olympiads. The start of each new Olympiad was celebrated with a festival of games.

The first recorded event was a footrace about 200 yards long, but soon longer races were added. Then other sports were included: wrestling, pentathlon, boxing, chariot racing, and pankration (a combination of boxing and wrestling).

The first Olympic athletes were all men. They had to be free born Greeks to compete. Their society at the time required all of their young men to be fit, ready for military service. By making fitness a point of national pride, there were many who could compete.

The palestra, or wrestling school, was popular with men of all ages. Athletic trainers worked to help perfect the athlete's movement and even controlled what the athletes ate.

In order to compete at an Olympic festival, an athlete had to arrive a month before the event and train with everyone else. The winners received an olive wreath, but not money. The victors were treated as great heroes in their home towns. They were often supplied with food for the rest of their lives and given the best seats at events.

If you were a woman and wanted to compete, you were out of luck. The only women who could compete were those who owned chariot horses, but even then they could not watch or take an active part. If a woman tried to attend, she could be killed. It was also impossible to try to disguise themselves as men and compete, because they competed in the nude.

The Olympics had been held for at least 500 years when Rome conquered Greece. Many Romans thought that athletics were degrading, especially when performed naked. Olympic support faltered until it was endorsed by Caesar Augustus.

The emphasis also changed under Roman hands. Instead of being a competition to bring out the best in the contestants, it was held to amuse crowds. In A.D. 394, the Roman Emperor Theodosius put a stop to them completely. For more than 1,000 years, the Olympic Games had helped bring out the best in athletes. Since the return of the Olympics in 1896, we've been able to enjoy them again.



Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

## The Ancient Olympics

### Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. An Olympiad was:
- A. Four horses in a chariot team
  - B. A period of four years
  - C. The first winner of four events
  - D. Four Olympic Games
2. Why were sports important to the Greeks?
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
3. If women weren't allowed to attend the games, why would they be allowed to own competing race horses?
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. How many events would be in a Pentathlon?
- A. Five
  - B. Seven
  - C. Nine
  - D. Four
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Athletes could compete in the ancient Olympics if:
- A. They trained for an event.
  - B. They were male.
  - C. They were female.
  - D. They lived in Greece.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Why didn't the Romans encourage the continuation of the Olympic Games?
- A. They didn't like naked athletes.
  - B. They didn't like Greeks.
  - C. They thought athletics were degrading.
  - D. They didn't like athletes.
7. Compare and contrast the life of a victorious athlete from ancient Greece to the lives of today's athletes.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

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Date \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. If a woman attended the Olympic Games how would she be treated?
- A. She would be cheered.
  - B. She would be killed.
  - C. No one cared if she was there.
  - D. None of the above.

**If you could compete in any Olympic event, which one would it be and why?**

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**If you were in charge of the Olympic Games, how would you decide which events to include?**

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